

# THEORETICAL GNOSIS AND DOCTRINAL SUFISM AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE TODAY

Seyyed Hossein Nasr

## INTRODUCTION

There is a body of knowledge in the Islamic tradition which, while highly intellectual in the original sense of this term, is neither theology (*kalām*) nor philosophy (*falsafah*) while dealing with many subjects of their concern although from another perspective. This body of knowledge is called doctrinal Sufism, *al-tasawwuf al-‘ilmī* in Arabic, to be contrasted to practical Sufism, *al-tasawwuf al-‘amalī*, or theoretical (and sometimes speculative) gnosis (this term being understood in its original and not sectarian sense), especially in the Persian-speaking world, where it is referred to as *‘irfān-i nazāri*. The seekers and masters of this body of knowledge have always considered it to be the Supreme Science, *al-‘ilm al-a‘lā*, and it corresponds in the Islamic context to what we have called elsewhere *scientia sacra*.<sup>23</sup> This corpus of knowledge is implicit in the Qur’an, *Hadith*, and the writings of early Sufis. It becomes somewhat more explicit from the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century onward in works of such masters as Hakīm Tirmidhī, Abū Hāmid Muhammad and Ahmad Ghazzālī, and ‘Ayn al-Qudāt Hamadānī and receives its full elaboration in the 7<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century in the hands of Ibn ‘Arabī, not all of whose writings are, however, concerned with this Supreme Science. This corpus is distinct from other genres of Sufi writing such as manuals for the practice of Sufism, works on spiritual virtues, Sufi hagiographies, Sufi poetry, etc. but during the past seven centuries this body of knowledge has exercised great influence on most other aspects of Sufism and also on later Islamic philosophy and even *kalām*.

Despite its immense influence in many parts of the Islamic world during the last centuries, doctrinal Sufism or theoretical gnosis has also had its

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<sup>23</sup> We use this Latin term to distinguish it from “sacred science” which possesses a more general meaning and includes also traditional cosmological sciences.

opponents since its inception, including certain scholars of the Qur'an and *Hadith*, some of the more exoterist jurists, many of the theologians (*mutakallimūn*), some of the more rationalistic philosophers and even some Sufis associated with Sufi centers (*khānqāh* or *zāmiyah*) and established orders. The latter have opposed the theoretical exposition of truths which they believe should be kept hidden and which they consider to be associated closely with spiritual practice and inward unveiling (*kashf*).<sup>24</sup> Still, this body of knowledge has been preserved and has continued to flourish over all these centuries, exercising immense influence in many domains of Islamic thought while remaining for many the crown of all knowledge.

### **A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE TRADITION OF THEORETICAL GNOSIS THE EARLIEST FOUNDATION**

Before turning to theoretical gnosis itself and its significance today, it is necessary to provide a brief history over the ages in the Islamic tradition of the expressions of this Supreme Science which itself stands beyond history and temporal development, being at the heart of the *philosophia perennis* as understood by traditional authorities,<sup>25</sup> and not being bound in its essence by the local coloring of various epochs and places. Of course, the wisdom with which this Supreme Science deals has always been and will always be, but it has received distinct formulations in the framework of various traditions at whose heart is to be found this wisdom concerning the nature of reality. In the Islamic tradition this knowledge was handed down in a principal manner by the Prophet to a number of his companions, chief among them 'Alī, and in later generations to the Sufi masters and of course the Shi'ite Imams, many of whom were in fact also poles of Sufism of their day.<sup>26</sup> Besides being

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<sup>24</sup> As far as opposition to Ibn 'Arabī's doctrines are concerned, see for example, Alexander Knysh, *Ibn 'Arabī in the Later Islamic Tradition— The Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999).

<sup>25</sup> On the traditional understanding of the perennial philosophy see Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), pp. 68ff. See also Frithjof Schuon, "Tracing the Notion of Philosophy," in his *Sufism—Veil and Quintessence*, trans. William Stoddart (Bloomington (IN): World Wisdom Books, 1981), Chap. 5, pp. 115-128.

<sup>26</sup> The relation between Shi'ite gnosis and Sufism is a fascinating and at the same time crucially important subject with which we cannot deal here. A number of Western scholars, chief among them Henry Corbin, have treated this issue metaphysically and historically. See for example his *En Islam iranien*, Vol. III, *Les Fidèles d'amour—Shi'ism et soufisme* (Paris:

transmitted orally, this knowledge was often expressed in the form of allusions, elliptical expressions, symbolic poems and the like.

Gradually from the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century onward some Sufis such as Hakīm Abū ‘Abd Allāh Tirmidhī (d. circa 320/938) began to write more systematically on certain aspects of Sufi doctrine. For example, Tirmidhī wrote on the central Sufi doctrine of *walāyah/wilāyah*, that is, initiatic and spiritual power as well as sanctity. During the century after him, Abū Hāmid Muhammad Ghazzālī (d. 505/1111) wrote on divine knowledge itself in both the *Ihyā’* and such shorter treatises as *al-Risālat al-laduniyyah* (only attributed to him according to some scholars) as well as writing an esoteric commentary on the Light Verse of the Qur’an in his *Mishkāt al-amwār*. His brother Ahmad (d. 520/1126) expounded gnosis and metaphysics in the language of love in his *Sawānib*. Shortly afterwards, ‘Ayn al-Qudāt Hamadānī (d. 525/1131) dealt with the subject of divine knowledge and a philosophical exposition of certain Sufi teachings in his *Maktūbāt* and *Tambidāt* while in his *Zubdab* he criticized the existing rationalistic currents in the thought of some philosophers and pointed to another way of knowing which is none other than gnosis. These figures in turn prepared the ground for Ibn ‘Arabī, although he is a colossal and providential figure whose writings cannot be reduced to simply historical influences of his predecessors.<sup>27</sup>

Many have quite rightly considered Ibn ‘Arabī as the father of theoretical gnosis or doctrinal Sufism.<sup>28</sup> His writings as already mentioned are not,

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Gallimard, 1972), especially pp. 149ff. See also Mohammad Ali Amir Mo‘ezzi and David Streight, *The Divine Guide in Early Shi‘ism: The Sources of Esotericism in Islam* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994); and S. H. Nasr, *Sufi Essays* (Chicago: ABC International Group, 1999), pp. 104-120.

<sup>27</sup> Unfortunately there is no complete or even nearly complete history of either Sufism itself doctrinal Sufism. Even the details of the School of Ibn ‘Arabī are far from being known. At the present stage of scholarship we know but a few major peaks of this majestic range and much remains to be discussed and brought to light concerning this subject in the arena of international scholarship.

<sup>28</sup> As an example of the relation between Ibn ‘Arabī and earlier gnostics one can compare his treatment of *walāyah/wilāyah* discussed by many scholars such as Michel Chodkiewicz and William Chittick (see for example works cited below) and the writings of Hakīm Tirmidhī. For the views of the latter see Tirmidhī, *Kitāb khatm al-anlīyā’*, ed. Osman Yahya (Beirut:

however, concerned only with pure metaphysics and gnosis. They also deal extensively with Qur'anic and *Hadith* commentary, the meaning of religious rites, various traditional sciences including the science of the symbolic significance of letters of the Arabic alphabet, ethics, law and many other matters, including poetry, all of which bear, nevertheless, an esoteric and gnostic colour. As far as the subject of this essay is concerned, it will be confined to works devoted completely to theoretical gnosis and metaphysics, works which deal directly with the Supreme Science of the Real. Otherwise, every work of Ibn 'Arabī and his School is related in one way or another to gnosis or *ma'rifa* as are writings of many other Sufis. The seminal work of Ibn 'Arabī on the subject of gnosis and one which is foundational to the whole tradition of theoretical gnosis in Islam is the *Fusus al-hikam* ("Bezels of Wisdom")<sup>29</sup> along with certain sections of his magnum opus *al-Futūhāt al-*

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Imprimerie Catholique, 1965); also Bernd Radtke, *Drei Schriften des Theosophen Tirmid* (Beirut: In Kommission bei Franz Steiner Verlag Stuttgart, 1992).

There is now a substantial body of works in European languages on Ibn 'Arabī as well as translations of many of his writings especially in French. On Ibn 'Arabī's life and works see Claude Addas, *Quest for the Red Sulphur: The Life of Ibn 'Arabi*, trans. Peter Kingsley (Cambridge (UK): Islamic Texts Society, 1993); and Stephen Hirtenstein, *The Unlimited Mercifier: The Spiritual Life and Thought of Ibn 'Arabi* (Ashland, OR: White Cloud Press, 1999). For an introduction to his teachings see William Chittick, *Ibn 'Arabi: Heir to the Prophets* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2005). For his works see Osman Yahya, *Histoire et classification de l'oeuvre d'Ibn 'Arabi* (Damascus: Institut Français de Damas, 1964). For Ibn 'Arabī's gnostic teachings see W. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989); his *The Self-Disclosure of God* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998); Michel Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean without Shore: Ibn 'Arabi, the Book and the Law*, trans. David Streight, (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993); *idem. Seal of the Saints—Prophethood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn 'Arabi*, trans. Liadain Sherrard (Cambridge, UK: The Islamic Texts Society, 1993); Henry Corbin, *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997); and Toshihiko Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism: A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), Part I, pp. 7-283.

<sup>29</sup> See *The Wisdom of the Prophets* of Ibn 'Arabī, trans. from the Arabic to French with notes by Titus Burchhardt, trans. from French to English by Angela Culme-Seymour (Aldsworth (UK): Beshara Publications, 1975). This work has penetrating comments on the metaphysics of Ibn 'Arabī by Burchhardt. The latest and the most successful translation of the *Fusus* in English is by Caner Dagli, *The Ringstones of Wisdom (Fusus al-hikam)* (Chicago: Kazi Publications, Great Books of the Islamic World, 2004). See also Charles-André Gilis, *Le Livre des chatons des sagesse* (Beirut: Al-Bouraq Éditions, 1997).

*makkiyyah*, (“The Meccan Illuminations”),<sup>30</sup> and a few of his shorter treatises including *Naqsh al-fusūs* which is Ibn ‘Arabī’s own commentary upon the *Fusūs*.

In any case the *Fusūs* was taken by later commentators as the central text of the tradition of theoretical gnosis or doctrinal Sufism. Many of the major later works of this tradition are in fact commentaries upon this inspired text. The history of these commentaries, many of which are “original” works themselves, stretching from the 7<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century to this day, is itself of great import for the understanding of this tradition and also reveals the widespread nature of the influence of this tradition from Morocco to the Malay world and China. Unfortunately, despite so much scholarship carried out in this field during the past few decades, there is still no thorough history of commentaries upon the *Fusūs* any more than there is a detailed history of the tradition of theoretical gnosis and/or Sufi metaphysics itself.

Ibn ‘Arabī died in Damascus in 638/1240 and it was from there that his teachings were disseminated. Some of his immediate students, who were particularly drawn to pure metaphysics and gnosis, with a number also having had training in Islamic philosophy, began to interpret the master’s teachings and especially his *Fusūs* in a more systematic and philosophical fashion thereby laying the ground for the systematic formulation of that Supreme Science of the Real with which the tradition of theoretical gnosis is concerned. The first commentator upon the *Fusūs* was Ibn ‘Arabī’s immediate student and Qūnawī’s close companion, ‘Afif al-Dīn al-Tilimsānī (690/1291) who commented upon the whole text but in summary fashion.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> See Ibn ‘Arabī, *Les Illuminations de la Mecque—The Meccan Illuminations*, trans. under the direction of Michel Chodkiewicz (Paris: Sindbad, 1988).

<sup>31</sup> On the history of the School of Ibn ‘Arabī and theoretical gnosis see W. Chittick, “The School of Ibn ‘Arabī,” in Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman (eds.), *History of Islamic Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 510-523; S. H. Nasr, “Seventh Century Sufism and the School of Ibn ‘Arabī,” in his *Sufi Essays* (Chicago: ABC International Group, 1999), pp. 97-103; and Annemarie Schimmel, “Theosophical Sufism” in her *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1978), pp. 259-286. There are also important references to this School in several introductions of Sayyid Jalāl al-Dīn Āshtiyānī to various philosophical and Sufi works edited by himself such as his edition of *Sharh fusūs al-bikām* of Qaysarī (Tehran: Shirkat-i Intishārāt-i ‘Ilmī wa Farhangī, 1375 [A.H. solar]). See also A. Knysh, *op. cit.*

But the most influential propagator of the master's teachings in the domain of gnosis and metaphysics and the person who gave the systematic exposition that characterizes later expressions of theoretical gnosis is Sadr al-Dīn Qūnawī (d. 673/1274).<sup>32</sup> This most important student of Ibn 'Arabī did not write a commentary on the text of the *Fusūs*, but he did write a work entitled *al-Fukūk* which explains the titles of the chapters of the *Fusūs* and was considered by many a later Sufi and gnostic as a key for the understanding of the mysteries of Ibn 'Arabī's text.<sup>33</sup> Qūnawī is also the author of a number of other works of a gnostic (*'irfānī*) nature, chief among them the *Miftāh al-ghayb*, a monumental work of theoretical gnosis which, along with its commentary by Shams al-Dīn Fanārī known as *Misbāh al-unṣ*, became one of the premier texts for the teaching of theoretical gnosis especially in Turkey and Persia.<sup>34</sup>

Qūnawī trained a number of students who themselves became major figures in the tradition of theoretical gnosis. But before turning to them it is necessary to mention a poet who was a contemporary of Ibn 'Arabī and who was to play an exceptional role in the later history of this tradition. This poet is 'Umar ibn al-Fārid (d. 632/1235), perhaps the greatest Sufi poet of the Arabic language, whose *al-Ta'īyyah* is considered as a complete exposition of the doctrines of *'irfān* expressed in sublime poetry, and the subject of several commentaries which are themselves seminal texts of *'irfān*.<sup>35</sup> There were also

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<sup>32</sup> See W. Chittick, *Faith and Practice of Islam* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992); Chittick, "The Five Divine Presences: From al-Qūnawī to al-Qaysarī," *Muslim World*, vol. 72, 1982, pp. 107-128; and Chittick, "The Last Will and Testament of Ibn 'Arabī's Foremost Disciple and Some Notes on its Author," *Sophia perennis*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1978, pp. 43-58. See also Muhammad Khwājawī, *Daw Sadr al-Dīn* (Tehran, Intishārāt-i Mawlā, 1378 [A.H. solar]), pp. 17-114, containing one of the best summaries of the life, works and thought of Qūnawī.

<sup>33</sup> See *Kitāb al-fukūk*, ed. by M. Khwājawī (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Mawlā, 1371 [A.H. solar]).

<sup>34</sup> See the edition of M. Khwājawī (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Mawlā, 1374 [A.H. solar]). This large volume includes, besides the texts of Qūnawī and Fanārī, glosses by later members of the school of theoretical gnosis in Persia from 'Aqā Muhammad Ridā Qumsha'ī, Mīrzā Hāshim Ashkiwarī, and Sayyid Muhammad Qummī to Ayatollah Rūh Allāh Khumaynī (Khomeinī) and Hassan-zādah Āmulī. There are also numerous commentaries on this text by Turkish authors.

<sup>35</sup> This work was studied and translated by Arthur J. Arberry along with other poems of Ibn al-Fārid in *The Mystical Poems of Ibn al-Fārid* (London: E. Walker, 1952 and Dublin: E. Walker,

many important Persian poets such as Fakhr al-Dīn ‘Irāqī (d. 688/1289), Awḥad al-Dīn Kirmānī (d. 635/1238), Shams al-Dīn Maghribī (d. 809/1406-07), Mahmūd Shabistārī (d. circa 718/1318), and ‘Abd al-Rahmān Jāmī (d. 898/1492), not to speak of Turkish poets and those of the Subcontinent who expressed Ibn ‘Arabian teachings in the medium of poetry but their poems do not belong strictly to doctrinal texts of the tradition of theoretical gnosis with which we are concerned here although some of the commentaries on their poetry do, such as *Sharḥ-i gulshan-i rāḡ* of Shams al-Dīn Lāhījī (d. before 900/1494) as do some poetic texts such as *Asbi‘at al-lama‘at* and *Lawa‘ib* of Jāmī.

Returning to Qūnawī’s students, as far as the subject of this essay is concerned the most notable and influential for the later tradition was first of all Sa‘īd al-Dīn Farghānī (d. 695/1296) who collected the commentaries of his master in Persian on the *Tā‘īyyah* and on their basis composed a major work in both Persian and Arabic (which contains certain additions) with the title *Mashāriq al-darārī* and *Muntaba‘l-madārik*, respectively.<sup>36</sup> Secondly, one must mention Mu‘ayyid al-Dīn Jandī (d. 700/1300), the author of the first extensive commentary upon the *Fusus*<sup>37</sup> which also influenced the very popular commentary of his student ‘Abd al-Razzāq Kāshānī (d. 730/1330).<sup>38</sup> Both of these men also wrote other notable works on theoretical gnosis such as the Persian treatise *Nafḥat al-rūb wa tuḥfat al-futūb* of Jandī and the Arabic *Ta‘wīl al-qur‘ān* of Kāshānī which has been also mistakenly attributed to Ibn ‘Arabī. This work is illustrative of a whole genre of writings which explain the principles of gnosis and metaphysics on the basis of commentary upon the inner levels of meaning of the Qur‘ān. During this early period, when the school of theoretical gnosis was taking shape, there were other figures of importance associated with the circle of Ibn ‘Arabī and Qūnawī although not the students of the latter such as Sa‘īd al-Dīn Hamūyah (d. 649/1252) and his

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1956). See also Emil Homerin, *The Wine of Love and Life* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).

<sup>36</sup> See S. J. Āshtiyānī’s edition with commentary and introduction upon *Mashāriq al-darārī* (Mashhad: Chāpkhāna-yi Dānishgāh-i Firdawsī, 1398 [A.H. solar]).

<sup>37</sup> See his *Sharḥ fusūs al-bikam* (Qom: Būstān-i Kitāb, 2002).

<sup>38</sup> See Kāshānī, *Sharḥ fusūs al-bikam*, (Cairo: Mustafā al-Bābī al-Halabī, 1966); also his *Majmū‘at al-rasā‘il wa‘l-musannafāt*, ed. Majīd Hādī-zādah (Tehran: Mīrāth-i Maktūb, 2000); and his *Traité sur la prédestination et le libre arbitre*, trans. Omar Guyard (Beirut: Al-Bouraq, 2005).

student ‘Azīz al-Dīn Nasafī (d. before 700/1300) who wrote several popular works in Persian based on the doctrine of *wahdat al-wujūd* and *al-insān al-kāmil*. It is only possible, however, in this short historical review to simply point to the existence of such figures.

## THE ARAB WORLD

From this early foundation located in Syria and Anatolia the teachings of the School of Ibn ‘Arabī and theoretical gnosis spread to different regions of the Islamic world. In summary fashion we shall try to deal with some of the most important figures in each region. Let us commence with the Arab world. In the Maghrib a very strong Sufi tradition has been preserved over the centuries but Maghribī Sufism, although devoted to gnosis in its purest form as we see in such figures as Abū Madyan, Ibn Mashīsh and Abū’l-Hasan al-Shādhilī, was not given to long theoretical expositions of gnosis as we see in the East.<sup>39</sup> Most works from this region were concerned with the practice of the Sufi path and explanation of practical Sufi teachings. One had to wait for the 12<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup> century to find in the works of Ahmad ibn ‘Ajībah (d. 1224/1809-10) treatises which belong to the genre of theoretical gnosis. But the oral tradition based on Ibn ‘Arabian teachings was kept alive as we see in the personal instructions and also written works of such celebrated 14<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> century Sufi masters of the Maghrib as Shaykh al-‘Alawī (d. 1353/1934) and Shaykh Muhammad al-Tādilī (d. 1371/1952).<sup>40</sup> Maghribī works on gnosis tended, however, to be usually less systematic and philosophical in their exposition of gnosis than those of the East.

A supreme example of Ibn ‘Arabian teachings emanating from the Maghrib is to be found in the writings of the celebrated Algerian *amīr* and Sufi master ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jazā’irī (d. 1300/1883), who taught the works of Ibn ‘Arabī when in exile in Damascus. Amīr ‘Abd al-Qādir also composed a

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<sup>39</sup> On Maghribī Sufism see Vincent Cornell, *The Realm of the Saint—Power and Authority in Moroccan Sufism* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1998).

<sup>40</sup> When Titus Burckhardt was in Morocco in the 1930’s, he experienced directly the presence of these teachings. We shall turn to this matter later in this essay.



number of independent works on gnosis such as the *Kitāb al-mawāqif*.<sup>41</sup> To this day the text of the *Fusūs* and the *Futūbāt* are taught in certain Sufi centers of the Maghrib especially those associated with the Shādhiliyyah Order which has continued to produce over the centuries its own distinct genre of Sufi literature going back to the prayers of Abū'l-Hasan al-Shādhilī (d. 656/1258) and especially the treatises of the third pole of the Order, Ibn 'Atā' Allāh al-Iskandarī (d.709/1309). In later centuries these two currents, the first issuing from early Shādhilism and the second from Ibn 'Arabian gnosis were to meet in many notable figures of Sufism from that as well as other regions.

There was greater interest in theoretical gnosis in the eastern part of the Arab world as far as the production of written texts is concerned. Strangely enough, however, Egypt, which has always been a major center of Sufism, is an exception. In that ancient land there has always been more interest in practical Sufism and Sufi ethics than in speculative thought and doctrinal Sufism although Akbarian teachings had spread to Mamluk Egypt in the 7<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century. There were also some popularizers of Ibn 'Arabī's teachings in Egypt, perhaps chief among them 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha'rānī (d. 973/1565), whose well known works present a more popular version of the *Futūbāt* and *Fusūs*.<sup>42</sup> He tried also to link Shādhilī teachings with those of Ibn 'Arabī. There are, however, few notable commentaries on classical texts of gnosis in Egypt in comparison with those one finds in many other lands. Theoretical gnosis was, nevertheless, taught and studied by many Egyptian figures. In this context it is interesting to note that even the modernist reformer Muhammad 'Abduh turned to the study of Ibn 'Arabī later in life. Opposition to these writings has remained, however, strong to this day in many circles in that land as one sees in the demonstrations in front of the Egyptian Parliament some years ago on the occasion of the publication of the *Futūbāt* by Osman Yahya who had edited the text critically.

In the Yemen there was great interest in Ibn 'Arabian gnosis in the School of Zabīd especially under the Rasūlids up to the 9<sup>th</sup>/15<sup>th</sup> century. Ismā'īl al-

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<sup>41</sup> See Michel Chodkiewicz, *Spiritual Writings of Amir 'Abd al-Kader*, trans. by a team under James Chrestensen and Tom Manning (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995); and *Le Livre des haltes*, edited and trans. by Michel Lagande (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

<sup>42</sup> See Michael Winter, *Society and Religion in Early Ottoman Egypt: Studies in the Writings of 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha'rānī* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1982).

Jabartī (d. 806/1403), Ahmad ibn al-Raddād (d. 821/1417-18) and ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī (d. 832/1428) were particularly significant figures of this School in the Yemen.<sup>43</sup> Al-Jīlī, who was originally Persian but resided in the Yemen, is particularly important because of his magnum opus, *al-Insān al-kāmil*, a primary work of gnosis that is used as a text for the instruction of theoretical gnosis from Morocco to India to this day. It is a more systematic exposition of the teaching of Ibn ‘Arabī.<sup>44</sup>

In the eastern Arab world it was especially in greater Palestine and Syria that one sees continuous interest in theoretical gnosis and the writing of important commentaries on Ibn ‘Arabī such as that of ‘Abd al-Ghanyī al-Nābulusī (d. 1143/1731) on the *Fusus*.<sup>45</sup> Also, the defense by Ibrāhīm ibn Hasan al-Kurānī (d. 1101/1690), a Kurdish scholar who resided in Mecca, of the gnosis of Ibn ‘Arabī had much influence in Syria and adjoining areas. Although, as in Egypt and elsewhere, many jurists and theologians in Syria going back to Ibn Taymiyyah and students of Sa’d al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī, opposed the doctrines of Ibn ‘Arabī, this School remained very much alive and continues to survive to this day in that region. One of the most remarkable contemporary Sufis who died in Beirut just a few years ago, the woman saint, Sayyidah Fātimah al-Yashrutīyyah, gave the title *al-Rihlah ila’l-Haqq* to her major work on Sufism on the basis of a dream of Ibn ‘Arabī.<sup>46</sup>

## OTTOMAN TURKEY

Turning to the Turkish part of the Ottoman world, we find a continuous and strong tradition in the study of theoretical gnosis going back to al-Qūnawī himself and his circle in Konya. Foremost among these figures after the

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<sup>43</sup> See A. Knysh, *op.cit.*, pp. 225ff.

<sup>44</sup> See al-Jīlī, *Universal Man*, extracts translated with commentary by Titus Burckhardt, English. English translation from the French by Angela Culme-Seymour (Sherborne, Glos: Beshara Press, 1983); and Reynold A. Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism* (Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press, 1978), Chapter II, pp. 77ff.

<sup>45</sup> See Nābulusī, *Sharh diwan ibn al-Farid* (Beirut: Dār al-Turāth, 196?); and Elizabeth Sirriyeh, *Sufi Visionary of Ottoman Damascus: ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī, 1641-1731* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2005).

<sup>46</sup> See Leslie Cadavid (ed. and trans.), *Two Who Attained* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2005).

founding of this School are Dā'ūd Qaysarī (d. 751/1350) and Shams al-Dīn Fanārī (d. 834/1431). A student of Kāshānī, Qaysarī wrote a number of works on gnosis, including his commentary on the *Tā'īyyah* of Ibn al-Fārid, but chief among them is his commentary upon the *Fusūs*, which is one of the most thorough and remains popular to this day.<sup>47</sup> He also wrote an introduction to this work called *al-Muqaddimah* which summarizes the whole cycle of gnostic doctrines in a masterly fashion and has been itself the subject of many commentaries including important glosses by Ayatollah Khomeini to which we shall turn shortly and a magisterial one by Sayyid Jalāl al-Dīn Āshtiyānī (d. 1426/2005).<sup>48</sup> As for Fanārī, besides being a chief *qadī* in the Ottoman Empire and a major authority on Islamic Law, he was the author of what many Turkish and Persian students of gnosis consider as the most advanced text of *'irfān*, namely the *Misbāh al-uns*.<sup>49</sup> It is strange that today in Bursa where he is buried, as elsewhere in Turkey, he is known primarily as a jurist and in Persia as a gnostic. In addition to these two major figures, one can mention Bālī Effendi (d. 960/1553), well known commentator of Ibn 'Arabī, and many other Sufis who left behind notable works on theoretical gnosis up the 14<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> century. In fact the influence of this School in the Ottoman world was very extensive including in such areas as Bosnia and is to be found in many different types of Turkish thinkers into the contemporary period. Among the most famous among them one can name Ahmed Avni Konuk (d. 1357/1938) who wrote a four volume commentary on the *Fusūs*; his contemporary Ferid Ram (d. 1363/1944), who was at the same time a gnostic, philosopher and political figure and the author of several works on Ibn

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<sup>47</sup> In light of our discussion of the significance of theoretical gnosis it is important to note that this master of *'irfān* was the first rector of a university, to use a contemporary term, in the Ottoman Empire. On Qaysarī see the introduction of S. J. Āshtiyānī to *Rasā'il-i Qaysari* (Tehran: Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy, 1357 [A.H. solar]); Mehmet Bayraktar (ed.), *Dāvūd Qaysari—Rasā'il* (Kayseri: Metroplitan Municipality, 1997); and also Emil Homerin, *op. cit.*

Many glosses have been written to this day on Qaysarī's commentary including that of Ayatollah Khomeini. See Āyat Allāh al-'Uzmā al-Imām al-Khumaynī, *Ta'liqāt 'alā sharh fusūs al-bikam wa misbāh al-uns* (Qom: Daftar-i Tablighāt-i Islāmī. 1410 [A.H. lunar]). There were also numerous Ottoman glosses and commentaries on Qaysarī.

<sup>48</sup> See his *Commentary upon the Introduction of Qaysari to the Fusūs al-Hikam of Ibn Arabī*, with introductions in French and English by Henry Corbin and Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Mashhad: Meshed University Press, 1966).

<sup>49</sup> See ft. nt. 12.

‘Arabian gnosis; and Ismail Fenni Ertugrul (d. 1359/1940), a philosopher who used the teachings of Ibn ‘Arabī to refute the errors of modern Western philosophy, especially materialism. His writings contributed greatly to the revival of interest in metaphysics in 14<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> century Turkey.<sup>50</sup>

## MUSLIM INDIA

We have been moving eastward in this brief historical survey and logically we should now turn to Persia and adjacent areas including Shi‘ite Iraq, which has been closely associated with Persia intellectually since the Safavid period and Afghanistan which also belongs to the same intellectual world as Persia. Because, however, of the central role played in Persia in the cultivation of *‘irfān-i nazārī* during the past few centuries, we shall turn to it at the end of this survey and first direct our attention farther east to India, Southeast Asia and China.

Although a thorough study has never been made of all the important figures associated with the School of Ibn ‘Arabī and theoretical gnosis in the Indian Subcontinent, the research that has been carried out so far reveals a very widespread influence of this School in that area. Already in the 8<sup>th</sup>/14<sup>th</sup> century Sayyid ‘Alī Hamadānī, the Persian Sufī who migrated to Kashmir (d. 786/1385), helped to spread Ibn ‘Arabī’s ideas in India. He not only wrote a Persian commentary on the *Fusus*, but also composed a number of independent treatises on *‘irfān*.<sup>51</sup> A century later ‘Alā’ al-Dīn ‘Alī ibn Ahmad Mahā’imī (d. 835/1432) not only commented upon the *Fusus* and Qūnāwī’s *Nusus*, but also wrote several independent expositions of gnosis of a more philosophical nature in Arabic. These works are related in many ways in approach to later works on gnosis written in Persia. He also wrote an Arabic commentary upon Shams al-Dīn Maghribī’s *Jām-i jahānnamāy* which some believe received much of its inspiration from the *Mashāriq al-darārī* of

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<sup>50</sup> See Ibrahim Kalin’s entries to these figures in Oliver Leaman (ed.), *Dictionary of Islamic Philosophy* (forthcoming).

<sup>51</sup> See W. Chittick, “The School of Ibn ‘Arabī,” in S. H. Nasr and Oliver Leaman (eds.), *History of Islamic Philosophy*, p. 520.

On the history of this School in India in general see W. Chittick, “Notes on Ibn ‘Arabī’s Influence in the Subcontinent,” in *The Muslim World*, vol. LXXXII, no. 3-4, July-October, 1992, pp. 218-241; and Sayyid ‘Alī ‘Abbās Rizvi, *A History of Sufism in India* (2 vols.) (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1978), *in passim*.

Farghānī. It is interesting to note that Maghribī's poetry, which like that of many other poets such as Kirmānī, 'Irāqī, Shabistarī, Shāh Ni'mat Allāh Walī (d. 834/1431) and Jāmī were based on basic gnostic theses such as *wahdat al-wujūd*, was especially appreciated by those followers of the School of Ibn 'Arabī who were acquainted with the Persian language as was the poetry of Ibn al-Fārid among Arab, Persian, Turkish and Indian followers of that School.

Notable exponents of theoretical gnosis in India are numerous and even the better known ones cannot be mentioned here.<sup>52</sup> But it is necessary to mention one figure who is probably the most profound master of this School in the Subcontinent. He is Muhibb Allāh Ilāhābādī (also known as Allāhābādī) (d. 1058/1648).<sup>53</sup> Author of an Arabic and even longer Persian commentary on the *Fusūs* and also an authoritative commentary on the *Futūḥāt*, Ilāhābādī also wrote independent treatises on *'irfān*. His writings emphasize intellection and sapience rather than just spiritual states which many Sufis in India as elsewhere claimed as the sole source of divine knowledge. The significance of the works of Muhibb Allāh Ilāhābādī in the tradition of theoretical gnosis under consideration in this essay and his later influence in India are immense. He marks one of the major peaks of the School not only in India, but in the whole of the Islamic world.

The central thesis of Ibn 'Arabian gnosis, that is, *wahdat al-wujūd* had a life of its own in India. While certain Sufis, such as Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindī, opposed its usual interpretations, it was embraced by many Sufis including such great saints as Gīsū Dirāz and Nizām al-Dīn Awliyā' and many of their disciples. One can hardly imagine the history of Sufism in the Subcontinent without the central role played by *'irfān-i nazārī*. Even notable Indian philosophers and theologians such as Shāh Walī Allāh (d. 1176/1762) of Delhi wrote works highly inspired by this School whose influence continued into the 14<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> century as we see in some of the works of Mawlānā Ashraf 'Alī Thanwī (d. 1362/1943).<sup>54</sup> Moreover,

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<sup>52</sup> Chittick discusses many of these figures in his "Notes on Ibn 'Arabī's Influence..."

<sup>53</sup> See Chittick, "Notes on Ibn 'Arabī's Influence ...," pp. 233ff.

<sup>54</sup> See for example, Shah Waliullah of Delhi, *Sufism and the Islamic Tradition*, trans. G. N. Jalbani, ed. D. B. Fry (London: Octagon Press, 1980). This work contains the translation of both the *Lamahāt*, one of Shāh Walī Allāh's main philosophical texts, and the *Sata'āt*. Both

once the philosophical School of Illumination (*ishrāq*) and the Transcendent Theosophy or Philosophy (*al-hikmat al-muta'aliyah*) reached India, there were many interactions between these Schools and the School of *'irfān* as we also see in Persia itself.

## SOUTHEAST ASIA

Turning to Southeast Asia and the Malay world, here we encounter a unique phenomenon, namely the role of the School of Ibn 'Arabī, sometimes called *wujūdīyyah*, in the very formation of Malay as an intellectual language suitable for Islamic discourse. Hamzah Fansūrī (d. 1000/1592), the most important figure of this School, was a major Malay poet and played a central role in the development of Malay as an Islamic language while he also had a command of Arabic and Persian. He was, moreover, a master of the doctrines of the School of Ibn 'Arabī.<sup>55</sup> He was followed in his attachment to this School by Shams al-Dīn Sumātrānī (d. 1040/1630). Although this School was opposed by certain other Malay Sufis such as Nūr al-Dīn Rānirī and most Malays paid more attention to the operative rather than the doctrinal aspect of Sufism, the School of theoretical gnosis continued to be studied in certain places and even today there are circles in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia where the teachings of this School are followed and many of the classical texts continue to be studied.<sup>56</sup>

## CHINA

A word must also be said about China. Until the 11<sup>th</sup>/17<sup>th</sup> century Chinese Muslims who dealt with intellectual matters did so on the basis of Arabic and Persian texts. It was only in the 11<sup>th</sup>/17<sup>th</sup> century that they began to use

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texts, and especially the first, reveal the influence of theoretical gnosis on this major intellectual figure.

On Thanvi see Fuad Nadeem, "A Traditional Islamic Response to the Rise of Modernism," in Joseph Lumbard (ed.), *Islam Fundamentalism, and the Betrayal of Tradition*, Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom Books, 2004), pp. 79-116.

<sup>55</sup> See Syed Muhaammad Naquib al-Attas, *The Mysticism of Hamzah Fansuri* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1970).

<sup>56</sup> See Zailan Moris, "South-east Asia," in Nasr and Leaman (eds.), *History of Islamic Philosophy*, pp. 1134ff.

classical Chinese and to seek to express Islamic metaphysics and philosophy in the language of Neo-Confucianism. Henceforth, there developed a significant body of Islamic thought in Chinese that is being systematically studied only now. It is interesting to note that two of the classical Islamic works to be rendered the earliest into Chinese are firstly the *Lawā'ih* of Jāmī, which is a masterly summary of *'irfān* in Persian, translated by Liu Chih (d. circa 1670) as *Chen-chao-wei* (“Displaying the Concealment of the Real Realm”); and secondly the *Asbi* “at al-lama’at also by Jāmī and again, as already mentioned, dealing with *'irfān*, translated by P’o Na-chih (d. after 1697) as *Chao-yüan pi-chüeh* (“The Mysterious Secret of the Original Display”).<sup>57</sup> Also the first Chinese Muslim thinker to expound Islamic teachings in Chinese, that is, Wang Taiyü (d. 1657 or 1658), who wrote his *Real Commentary on the True Teaching* in 1642 to be followed by several other works, was steeped in the same *'irfānī* tradition. The School of theoretical gnosis was therefore destined to play a major role in the encounter on the highest level between the Chinese and the Islamic intellectual traditions during the past few centuries.

## PERSIA

Persia was destined to become one of the main centers, if not the central arena, for the later development of theoretical gnosis. The circle of Qūnawī was already closely connected to the Persian cultural world and many of its members, including Qūnawī himself, wrote in Persian as well as Arabic. Qūnawī’s student, Fakhr al-Dīn ‘Irāqī is considered one of the greatest poets of the Persian language. Among other early members of the School one can mention Sa’d al-Dīn Hamūyah, his disciple ‘Azīz al-Dīn Nasafī, who wrote on gnosis in readily accessible Persian, Awhad al-Dīn Balyānī (d. 686/1288) from Shiraz, whose famous *Risālat al-ahadiyyah* was for a long time attributed to Ibn ‘Arabī,<sup>58</sup> and ‘Abd al-Razzāq Kāshānī who, as already mentioned, is a major figure of the School of theoretical gnosis and a prominent

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<sup>57</sup> Sachiko Murata, *Chinese Gleams of Sufi Light: Wang Tai-Yü’s Great Learning of the Pure and Real and Liu Chih’s Displaying the Concealment of the Real Realm* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000), pp. 32ff. See also Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, *The Dao of Mubammad: A Cultural History of Muslims in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

<sup>58</sup> See Balyānī, *Épître sur l’Unicité absolue*, trans. Michel Chodkiewicz (Paris: Les Deux Océans, 1982).

commentator upon the *Fusūs*. From the 8<sup>th</sup>/14<sup>th</sup> century onward in Persia we see on the one hand the continuation of the School of theoretical gnosis through the appearance of prose works in both Arabic and Persian either in the form of commentary upon the *Fusūs* and other seminal texts of this School or as independent treatises. On the other hand we observe the deep influence of this School in Persian Sufi literature, especially poetry. A supreme example is the *Gulshan-i rāz* of Mahmūd Shabistārī, one of the greatest masterpieces of Persian Sufi poetry which summarizes the principles of Ibn ‘Arabian gnosis in verses of celestial beauty. That is why its commentary by Muhammad Lāhijī in the 9<sup>th</sup>/15<sup>th</sup> century is such a major text of theoretical gnosis. Here, however, we are only concerned with the prose and systematic works of theoretical gnosis and not the poetical tradition but the nexus between the two should not be forgotten as we see in the works of ‘Irāqī, Shāh Ni‘mat Allāh Walī, Jāmī and many others.

Another important event that took place in the 8<sup>th</sup>/14<sup>th</sup> century and left its deep influence upon the history of the School during the Safavid, Qajar and Pahlavi periods was the integration of Ibn ‘Arabian gnosis into Shi‘ism which possesses its own gnostic teachings to which scholars refer as *‘irfān-i shi‘ī*. These two outwardly distinct schools are inwardly connected and go back to the original esoteric and gnostic dimension of the Islamic revelation. It was most of all Sayyid Haydar Āmulī (d. 787/1385) who brought about a synthesis of these two branches of the tree of gnosis, although he also did make certain criticisms of Ibn ‘Arabī, especially concerning the question of *walāyah/wilāyah*. Many others walked later in his footsteps. Āmulī was at once a major Twelve-Imam Shi‘ite theologian and a Sufi devoted to the School of Ibn ‘Arabī. His *Jāmi‘ al-asrār* is a pivotal text for the gnosis of Ibn ‘Arabī in a Shi‘ite context.<sup>59</sup> He was also the author of a major commentary upon the *Fusūs* as well as independent metaphysical treatises. The later development of theoretical gnosis in Persia, as well as the School of Transcendent Theosophy of Mullā Sadrā cannot be fully understood without consideration of Āmulī’s works.

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<sup>59</sup> See Henry Corbin and Osman Yahya, *La Philosophie shi‘ite* (Paris-Tehran: Andrien-Maisonneuve and Departement d’Iranologie, 1969); and (same authors) *Le Texte des textes* (Paris-Tehran: Andrien-Maisonneuve and Departement d’Iranologie, 1975). This work contains Āmulī’s commentary on the *Fusūs*. See also Henry Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, Vol. III, pp. 149ff.



The 8<sup>th</sup>/14<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup>/15<sup>th</sup> century marks a period of intense activity in the field of theoretical gnosis and the School of Ibn ‘Arabī in Persia. Commentaries upon the *Fusus* continued to appear. The first in Persian was most likely that of Rukn al-Dīn Mas‘ūd Shīrāzī, known as Bāhā Ruknā (d. 769/1367).<sup>60</sup> But there were many others by such figures as Tāj al-Dīn Khwārazmī (d. circa 838/1435),<sup>61</sup> Shāh Ni‘mat Allāh Walī, Ibn Turkah (d. 830/1437) and Jāmī, who in a sense brings this period to an end. This extensive activity in the domain of gnosis associated specifically with the School of Ibn ‘Arabī was in addition to the flowering of the Sufism of the School of Khurasan and Central Asia and profound gnostic teachings, mostly in poetic form, of figures such as ‘Attār and Rūmī on the one hand and the Kubrawiyyah School founded by Najm al-Dīn Kubrā on the other. We can hardly overemphasize the importance of the Khurasānī and Central Asian Schools and their profound metaphysical teachings, but in this essay we shall not deal with them, being only concerned with *‘irfān-i nazārī* in its association with the School of Ibn ‘Arabī.

Among the gnostic figures of this period, Sā’in al-Dīn ibn Turkah Isfahānī stands out as far as his later influence is concerned. The author of many independent treatises on metaphysics and the traditional sciences, he also wrote a commentary upon the *Fusus* which became popular.<sup>62</sup> But the work that made him one of the pillars of the school of theoretical gnosis in Persia during later centuries is his *Tambid al-qawā’id*.<sup>63</sup> This masterly treatment of the cycle of gnosis became a popular textbook for the teaching of the subject in Persia especially during the Qajar period and has remained so to this day as

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<sup>60</sup> Edited by Rajab ‘Alī Mazlūmī (Tehran: McGill University and Tehran University Press, 1980).

<sup>61</sup> This long work has been studied and edited by Māyil Hirawī as *Sharh fusūs al-bikam* (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Mawlā, 1368 [A.H. solar]).

<sup>62</sup> Edited by Muhsin Bīdādfar (Qom: Intishārāt-i Bīdār, 1378 [A. H. solar]).

<sup>63</sup> Edited with introduction and commentary by S. J. Āshtiyānī (Tehran: Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy, 1976). On Ibn Turkah see H. Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, vol. III, pp. 233ff.; and S. H. Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy—From Its Origin to Today—Philosophy in the Land of Prophecy* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, forthcoming), Chapter 10.

one sees in the extensive recension of it by the contemporary Persian philosopher and gnostic, ‘Abd Allāh Jawādī Āmulī.<sup>64</sup>

The figure, who was given the title of the “Seal of Persian Poets”, that is, ‘Abd al-Rahmān Jāmī from Herat, was also in a sense the seal of this period in the history of theoretical gnosis in Persia. One of the greatest poets of the Persian language, he was also a master of Ibn ‘Arabī gnosis and in a sense synthesized within his works the two distinct currents of Islamic spirituality that flowed from Ibn ‘Arabī and Rūmī. Jāmī is the author of a number of commentaries upon the works of Ibn ‘Arabī such as the famous *Naqd al-nusus fī sharh naqsh al-fusus*.<sup>65</sup> He also authored summaries of the teachings of this School in works already mentioned such as the *Lawā’ih* and *Asbi‘at al-lama‘at*, both literary masterpieces which are used as texts for the teaching of ‘*irfān* to this day.<sup>66</sup>

The spread of Twelve-Imam Shi‘ism in Persia during the Safavid period transformed the scene as far as the study and teaching of ‘*irfān* was concerned. During the earlier part of Safavid rule, many Sufi orders flourished in Persia whereas from the 11<sup>th</sup>/17<sup>th</sup> century onward opposition grew against Sufism especially among the class of Shi‘ite scholars who henceforth chose to speak of ‘*irfān* rather than *tasawwuf*.<sup>67</sup> Although other types of Sufi and gnostic writings appeared during this period by members of various Sufi orders such as the Dhahabīs and ‘*irfān-i shi‘ī* also flourished in certain circles, few new works on the subject of theoretical gnosis appeared during this period in comparison to the previous era. The main influence of the School of Ibn ‘Arabī came to be felt through the writings of Mullā Sadrā (d. 1050/1640/41), who was deeply influenced by Shaykh al-Akbar and

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<sup>64</sup> See Āmulī, *Tabrīr tambīd al-qawā‘id* (Tehran: Intishārāt-i al-Zahrā’, 1372 [A.H. solar]). This voluminous text is one of the major works on theoretical gnosis to appear in recent times.

<sup>65</sup> Edited by W. Chittick (Tehran: The Imperial Academy of Philosophy, 1977). This edition contains a major introduction by Āshtiyānī dealing with some of the most delicate issues of ‘*irfān*.

<sup>66</sup> We were privileged to study the *Asbi‘at al-lama‘at* over a several year period with Sayyid Muhammad Kāzīm ‘Assār who expounded the major themes of gnosis through this beautifully written text.

<sup>67</sup> On Shi‘ism in Safavid Persia see, S. H. Nasr, *Traditional Islam in the Modern World* (London: KPI, 1987), Chapter 4, pp. 59-72.

quoted from him extensively in his *Aṣfār* and elsewhere.<sup>68</sup> But technically speaking the School of Mullā Sadrā is associated with *ḥikmat* and not *ʿirfān*, although Mullā Sadrā was also a gnostic and deeply versed in Ibn ʿArabian teachings. But he integrated elements of this teaching into his *al-ḥikmat al-mutaʿāliyah* (Transcendent Theosophy or Philosophy) and did not write separate treatises on pure gnosis in the manner of an Ibn ʿArabī or Qūnawī. It is highly significant that Mullā Sadrā did not leave behind a commentary on the *Fuṣūṣ* like that of Kāshānī or Qaysarī nor write a treatise like *Tambid al-qawāʿid* although he was well acquainted with Ibn Turkah. Nor do we find major works devoted purely to theoretical gnosis or *ʿirfān-i nazārī* by his students such as Fayd Kāshānī, who was also a gnostic, or Lāhījī. The School of *ʿirfān-i nazārī* certainly continued during the Safavid era but the major intellectual thrust of the period was in the creation of the School of Transcendent Theosophy, which had incorporated major theses of *ʿirfān* such as *wahdat al-wujūd* into its philosophical system, but which was distinct in the structure of its doctrines, manner of presentation and method of demonstration from *ʿirfān*. Furthermore, the subject of *ḥikmat* is “being conditioned by negation” (*wujūd bi-shart-i lā*) while the subject of *ʿirfān* is totally non-conditioned being (*wujūd lā bi-shart*).

In any case as far as Persia is concerned, one had to wait for the Qajar period to see a major revival of the teaching of *ʿirfān-i nazārī* and the appearance of important commentaries on classical texts of this tradition. This revival occurred along with the revivification of the teachings of the School of Mullā Sadrā and many masters of this period were both *ḥakīm* and *ʿarif*, while *ʿirfān* continued to influence philosophy deeply. The first major figure to mention in the context of the School of *ʿirfān* during the Qajar period is Sayyid Radī Lārījānī (d. 1270/1853) who was a student of Mullā ʿAlī Nūrī in *ḥikmat* but we know less of his lineage in *ʿirfān*.<sup>69</sup> He is said to have

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<sup>68</sup> See S. H. Nasr, *Sadr al-Din Shirāzī and his Transcendent Theosophy* (Tehran: Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies, 1997), Chapter 4, pp. 69-82.

<sup>69</sup> See Yahya Christian Bonaud, *L'Imam Khomeyni, un gnostique méconnu du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Beirut: Les Éditions Al-Bouraq, 1997), pp. 80-81. Bonaud mentions in this connection a number of names such as Mullā Hasan Lunbānī (d. 1094/1683) and Muhammad ʿAlī Muzaffar (d. 1198/1783-84) as does S. J. Āshutiānī, but the history of *ʿirfān-i nazārī* from the Safavid period to Sayyid Radī is far from clear. As far as *ʿirfān* is concerned, Sayyid Radī possibly studied with Mullā Muhammad Jaʿfar Ābādaʿī.

possessed exalted spiritual states and was given the title of “Possessor of the States of the Inner (*bātin*) World” by his contemporaries.<sup>70</sup> We know that he taught the *Fusūs* and *Tambid al-qawā'id* in Isfahan and was considered as a saint as well as master of *'irfān-i nazārī*.

Sayyid Radī's most important student was Āqā Muhammad Ridā Qumsha'ī (d. 1306/1888-9), whom many Persian experts on *'irfān* consider as a second Ibn 'Arabī and the most prominent commentator upon gnostic texts such as the *Fusūs* since the time of Qūnawī. Āqā Muhammad Ridā studied in Isfahan but later migrated to Tehran which became henceforth perhaps the most important for the teaching of *'irfān-i nazārī* for many decades.<sup>71</sup> There, he taught and trained numerous important students in both *'irfān* and *hikmat*. He also wrote a number of important glosses and commentaries on such works as the *Tambid al-qawā'id* and Qaysarī's commentary on the *Fusūs* as well as some of the works of Mullā Sadrā, in addition to independent treatises. Like so many masters of *'irfān-i nazārī*, Āqā Muhammad Ridā was also a fine poet and composed poetry under the pen-name Sahbā. Unfortunately much of his poetry is lost. It is also of great significance to note that Āqā Muhammad Ridā emphasized the importance of spiritual practice and the need for a spiritual master.<sup>72</sup>

One of Āqā Muhammad Ridā's important students was Mīrzā Hāshim Ashkiwarī Rashtī (d. 1332/1914), commentator upon *Misbāh al-uns*, who took over the circle of instruction of *'irfān* in Tehran after Āqā Muhammad Ridā. He was in turn teacher of such famous *hakīms* and *'arīfs* of the past century as Mīrzā Mahdī Āshtiyānī (d. 1362/1953), Mīrzā Ahmad Āshtiyānī (d. 1359/1940), Sayyid Muhammad Kāzīm 'Assār (d. 1396/1975) and

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<sup>70</sup> On him see Manūchīhr Sadūq Suhā, *Tārīkh-i hukamā' wa 'urafā-yi muta'akbkhīr* (Tehran: Intishārāt-i hikmat, 1381 [A.H. solar]), pp. 261-262.

<sup>71</sup> On Āqā Muhammad Ridā see Sadūqī Suhā, *op.cit.*, p. 259ff. On him and other major figures of the School of Tehran see also Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy from its Origin to Today*, Chapter 13. See also the introductions of S. J. Āshtiyānī to *Sharh al-mashā'ir* of Lāhījānī (Mashhad: Mashhad University Press, 1964); and to Mullā Sadrā's *al-Shawāhid al-rubūbiyyah* (Mashhad: Mashhad University Press, 1967), concerning Āqā Muhammad Ridā and the whole history of *'irfān* in Persia from the end of the Safavid period onward.

<sup>72</sup> See Sadūqī Suhā, *op.cit.*, p. 267.

Muhammad ‘Alī Shāhābādī (d. 1369/1951).<sup>73</sup> The latter is particularly important not only for his own writings on gnosis including his *Rashahāt al-bihār*, but for being the master of Ayatollah Khomeini in *‘irfān-i nazārī*, the person with whom the latter studied the *Fusus* without the presence of any other student.<sup>74</sup> Many of the ideas of Ayatollah Khomeini in his *Ta’līqāt*, *Sharh du‘ā-i sabar* and *Misbāh al-bidāyah ila’l-khilāfah wa’l-walāyah/wilāyah* reflect the interpretations of Shāhābādī whom he revered highly.

The extensive political fame and influence of Ayatollah Rūh Allāh Khumaynī (Khomeini) (d. 1409/1989) has prevented many people in the West and even within the Islamic world to pay serious attention to his gnostic works,<sup>75</sup> and his place in the long history of theoretical gnosis outlined in a summary fashion above. There is no doubt that he was attracted to the study of *‘irfān* from an early age and in later years, while he also studied *hikmat*, not to speak of the transmitted sciences, his great love remained *‘irfān*, although he was also a recognized master of the School of Mullā Sadrā.<sup>76</sup> In his writings he combined the tradition of *‘irfān-i shī‘ī*<sup>77</sup> and that of Ibn ‘Arabī. For example his *Sharh du‘ā-i sabar* belongs to the world of Shi‘ite gnosis; the

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<sup>73</sup> These figures are discussed by Suhā. See also our *Islamic Philosophy ...*. For Shāhābādī see Bonaud, *op.cit.*, pp. 82-87.

<sup>74</sup> Bonaud, *op.cit.*, p. 87.

<sup>75</sup> The major study of Bonaud, cited above, is an exception. Nothing comparable exists in English.

<sup>76</sup> One day in the 1960’s when we were discussing the philosophical ideas of Ayatollah Khomeini with our eminent teacher, ‘Allāmah Tabātabā‘ī, who was his friend, we asked the ‘Allāmah what philosophical schools most attracted Ayatollah Khomeini. He answered that Ayatollah Khomeini had little patience (*hawsilab*) for the logical arguments of Peripatetic philosophy but was more interested in Mullā Sadrā and Ibn ‘Arabī. The same view is confirmed by Mīrzā Mahdī Hā‘irī who studied with Ayatollah Khomeini and who says,

“He [Imam Khomeini] did not have much interest in Peripatetic philosophy and logic. His teaching of the *Asfār* had more of a gnostic attraction. He had studied *‘irfān* well with Āqā-yī Shāhābādī and was busy all the time reading the books of Ibn ‘Arabī. Therefore, he also looked at the *Asfār* from the point of view of Ibn ‘Arabī and not from the perspective of Ibn Sīnā and Fārābī. When he came to the words of Ibn Sīnā and Fārābī, he would become completely uncomfortable and would escape from philosophical constraints through the rich power of *‘irfān*.”

*Kbirad-nāma-yi hamshahrī*, June 1, 2005, p. 17

<sup>77</sup> On the different gnostic currents in Shi‘ism see our foreword to Husaynī Tihirānī, *Kernel of the Kernel* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003), pp. xiii-xix.

*Ta'liqāt 'alā sharh Fusūs il-hikam wa misbāh il-uns* belong to the tradition of Ibn 'Arabian gnosis as interpreted over the centuries by Shi'ite gnostics and with many new insights into the understanding of these classical texts; and *Misbāh al-bidāyah ila'l-kehilāfab wa'l-walāyah/wilāyah* represent a synthesis of the two schools of gnosis. Other mystical works of Ayatollah Khomeini such as *Chihil hadīth*, *Sirr al-salāh*, *Ādāb al-salāh* and *Sharh-i hadīth-i junūd-i 'aql wa jabl* are also works of a gnostic and esoteric quality reminiscent of a Fayd Kāshānī or Qādī Sa'īd Qummī and going back even earlier, classical Sufi works on such subjects, but they do not fall fully under the category of *'irfān-i nazari* as we have defined it in this essay.<sup>78</sup> Ayatollah Khomeini also composed poems of a mystical and gnostic nature.

For many it is interesting to note and might even appear as perplexing that although later in life he entered fully into the arena of politics, earlier in his life Ayatollah Khomeini was very much interested not only in theoretical gnosis but also in operative Sufism with its ascetic dimension and emphasis on detachment from the world. The key to this riddle should perhaps be sought first of all in the stages of man's journeys (*asfār*) to God mentioned by Mullā Sadrā at the beginning of the *Asfār*, stages which include both the journey from creation (*al-kehalq*) to God (*al-Haqq*) and return to creation with God and secondly in Ayatollah Khomeini's understanding of the stages of this journey as they applied to him and to what he considered to be his mission in life. In any case although the later part of his life differed greatly outwardly from that of Āqā Muhammad Ridā, his early life was much like that of the figure whom he called "the master of our masters". Also like Āqā Muhammad Ridā, Ayatollah Khomeini was poetically gifted and deeply immersed in the tradition of Persian Sufi poetry.

There is need in the future to study more closely the relation between the contemplative and active dimensions of life in the case of Ayatollah Khomeini in relation to the teachings of *'irfān*, and more generally in the lives of several other major Muslim political figures of the 14<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> century such

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<sup>78</sup> On the gnostic works of Ayatollah Khomeini see Bonaud, *op.cit.*, Chapter 2, pp. 103ff. The institution called Mu'assisa-yi Tanzīm wa Nashr-i Athār-i al-Imām al-Khumaynī in Tehran has published all of his works including those concerned with gnosis as well as the *dīvān* of his poetry.

as Hasan al-Bannā', the founder of the Ikhwān al-muslimīn, and Mawlānā Mawdūdī, the founder of Jamā'at-i islāmī of Pakistan, both of whom were deeply immersed in politics while being earlier in life devoted in one way or another to Sufism. In the case of none of the major Muslim political figures of the 14<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> century, however, is there such a close relationship with Sufism and 'irfān as one finds in the case of Ayatollah Khomeini. Such matters raise issues of central concern for the understanding of the relation between Sufism and 'irfān on the one hand and external political action on the other. These issues are not, however, our concern here. What is important to note is that irrespective of his political views and actions, and his particular interpretation of *walāyah/wilāyah*, Ayatollah Khomeini remains an important figure in the long history of theoretical gnosis in the Islamic world.

The tradition of 'irfān-i nazārī continues to this day in Persia.<sup>79</sup> After the generation of such figures as Ayatollah Khomeini, 'Allāmah Tabātabā'ī (d. 1404/1983), who was a major gnostic without writing any commentaries on Ibn 'Arabī, and also one of the important masters of 'irfān, Sayyid Muhammad Kāzīm 'Assār, notable figures have appeared upon the scene such as Sayyid Jalāl al-Dīn Āshtiyanī, Hasan-zādah Āmulī, and Jawād Āmulī, of whom the latter two still teach at Qom. Āshtiyanī's commentary upon the introduction of Qaysarī to the *Fusūs* mentioned above, as well as a number of his other commentaries such as those on *Tambid al-qawā'id* and *Naqd al-nusūs*, are major contemporary texts of theoretical gnosis, while the recent commentary by Hasan-zādah Āmulī on the *Fusūs* entitled *Mumidd al-himam dar sbarh-i Fusūs al-hikam*<sup>80</sup> reveals the living nature of this School in Persia as does Jawād Āmulī's recension of *Tambid al-qawā'id*.

## WITH WHAT DOES THEORETICAL GNOSIS DEAL?

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<sup>79</sup> This is not only true of Persia but also of Shi'ite circles in Iraq such as the one in Najaf, at least until a few years ago. During the Qajar and early Pahlavi periods, Tehran was better known for 'irfān-i nazārī and Najaf for operative 'irfān, although texts such as the *Fusūs* were also taught in Najaf by remarkable masters with whom such luminaries as 'Allāmah Tabātabā'ī studied this seminal text.

<sup>80</sup> Tehran, Sāzīmān-i chāp wa intishārāt-i Wizārāt-i Farhang wa Irshād-i Islāmī, 1378 [A.H. solar].

Before turning to the significance of theoretical gnosis and doctrinal Sufism, it is necessary to mention a few words about what subjects this Supreme Science treats. And before delineating the subjects made known through theoretical gnosis, one needs to know how one can gain such a knowledge. The knowledge of the Supreme Reality or the Supreme Substance is itself the highest knowledge and constitutes the very substance of principal knowledge. As Frithjof Schuon, one of the foremost contemporary expositors of gnosis and metaphysics has said, “The substance of knowledge is Knowledge of the Substance.”<sup>81</sup> This knowledge is contained deep within the heart/intellect and gaining it is more of a recovery than a discovery. It is ultimately remembrance, the Platonic *anamnesis*. The faculty associated with this knowledge is the intellect (*al-'aql*), the *nous*, not to be confused with reason. The correct functioning of the intellect within man is in most cases in need of that objective manifestation of the Intellect that is revelation.<sup>82</sup> In any case its attainment always requires intellectual intuition, which is ultimately a Divine gift, and the ability to “taste” the truth. In the Islamic tradition this supreme knowledge or gnosis is associated with such qualities as *dhawq* (taste), *hads* (intuition), *isbrāq* (illumination) and *hudūr* (presence). Those who are able to understand gnosis must possess certain intellectual gifts not to be confused with powers of mere ratiocination. Also in Islam gnosis has always been related to the inner meaning of the revelation and its attainment of the initiatic and esoteric power of *walāyah/wilāyah* which issues from the fountain of prophecy and about which so many Muslim gnostics from Ibn ‘Arabī to Sayyid Haydar Āmulī and from Āqā Muhammad Ridā Qumsha‘ī to Muhammad ‘Alī Shāhābādī to Ayatollah Khomeini have written with differing interpretations.

Turning now to the subjects with which theoretical gnosis and doctrinal Sufism deal, we must mention that it is not our intention here to expound its teachings, but only the subjects which are of concern to this School.<sup>83</sup> The

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<sup>81</sup> To quote the original French, “*La substance de la connaissance est la Connaissance de la Substance.*” F. Schuon, *Formes et substance dans les religions* (Paris: Dervy-Livres, 1975, p. 35).

<sup>82</sup> We have dealt with this issue extensively in our *Knowledge and the Sacred*; see also F. Schuon, *Stations of Wisdom* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom Books, 1995), pp. 1-42.

<sup>83</sup> We have dealt with the teachings of this Supreme Science in our *Knowledge and the Sacred*, Chapter 4, pp. 130ff. This Supreme Science is of course also metaphysics as traditionally understood. See René Guénon, “Oriental Metaphysics,” in Jacob Needleman (ed.), *The Sword*



supreme subject of gnosis may be said to be the Supreme Principle or Reality which is absolute and infinite and not even bound by the condition of being absolute and infinite. The gnostics often write that it is Absolute Being without even the “limitation” of absoluteness. It is therefore the Reality which is both Beyond-Being and Absolute Being. Later gnostics called this supreme subject *wujūd-i lā bi-shart-i maqāmī*, the totally unconditioned Being which is the ground for all divisions and distinctions. Gnosis, therefore, deals not only with ontology but with a metaphysics that is grounded beyond Being in the Supreme Reality of which Being usually understood is the first determination. It begins with the Divine Ipseity or *Dhāt* that is above all limits and determinations and that is sometimes referred to as *al-Haqq* (the Truth). It also deals with multiplicity within the Divine Order, that is, the Divine Names and Qualities which are so many Self-Determinations and Self-Disclosures of the Supreme Essence.

This Supreme Science (*al-‘ilm al-a‘lā*) that is gnosis also deals with manifestations of the Principle, with all the levels of universal existence from the archangelic to the material but views all that exists in the cosmic order in light of the Principle. It descends from the Principle to manifestation and deals with cosmology as a science of the cosmos in relation to the Principle, as a form of knowledge that provides maps to guide and orient human beings who are situated in the confines of cosmic existence to the Metacosmic Reality. This Supreme Science also deals of necessity with the human state in all its width, breadth, depth and height. It contains a most profound “science of man”, which one could call an anthropology if this term were to be understood in its traditional and not modern sense, as well as a “science of the spirit” within man or pneumatology which is absent from the worldview of the modern world. Finally, gnosis deals with the Principle and all the levels of manifestation from the point of view of the unity which dominates over all that exists and which is especially central to the Islamic perspective. One might say that Islamic metaphysics or gnosis is dominated by the two basic doctrines of the “transcendent oneness of Being” (*wahdat al-*

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*of Gnosis* (Boston: Arkana, 1986), pp. 40-56. Schuon has also written many illuminating pages on this subject including his book *Survey of Metaphysics and Esotericism*, trans. Gustavo Polit (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom Books, 1986). See also S. H. Nasr (ed.), *The Essential Frithjof Schuon* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom Books, 2005), especially pp. 309ff.

*wujūd*) and the universal man (*al-insān al-kāmil*) which includes not only a gnostic anthropology but also a symbolic cosmology on the basis of the correspondence between the microcosm and macrocosm.

Theoretical gnosis is also concerned in the deepest sense with the reality of revelation and religion. The question of the relation between gnosis and esoterism on the one hand and the formal and exoteric aspect of religion on the other is a complicated one into which we cannot enter here. What is clear is that in every traditional society gnosis and esoterism have been inextricably tied to the religious climate in which they have existed. This is as true of Luria and Jewish esoterism as it is of Śankara and Hindu gnosis as well as everything in between. In any case in this essay, which deals with gnosis in the Islamic tradition, we need to mention the deepest concern of the gnostics with the realities of religion and explanation of its teachings on the most profound level as we observe in many Sufi treatises on the inner meaning of the Islamic rites.<sup>84</sup>

Theoretical gnosis is concerned not only with the practical aspects of religion, but also with basic Islamic doctrines such as creation, prophecy, eschatology, etc. Islamic masters of gnosis speak of both the why and the how of creation. They speak of “creation *in* God” as well as creation *by* God.<sup>85</sup> They expound the doctrine of the immutable archetypes (*al-a‘yān al-thābitah*) and the breathing of existence upon them associated with the Divine Mercy which brings about the created order. They see creation itself as the Self-Disclosure of God.<sup>86</sup> They also discuss the renewal of creation (*tajdīd al-khalq*) at every moment.<sup>87</sup> Furthermore, theoretical gnosis speaks extensively about the end as well as the beginning of things. The deepest explanation of

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<sup>84</sup> See for example, Martin Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1973), Chapter X, pp. 176ff; and Henry Corbin, *Temple and Contemplation*, trans. Philip and Liadain Sherrard (London: KPI, 1986), pp. 183ff.

<sup>85</sup> Metaphysically speaking, creation must take place in God before the external act of creation takes place. On this important doctrine across many religious boundaries see Leo Schaya, *La Création en Dieu* (Paris, Dervy-Livres, 1983).

<sup>86</sup> See W. Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s Cosmology* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998).

<sup>87</sup> See Toshihiko Tzutsu, *Creation and the Timeless Order of Things* (Ashland, OR: White Cloud Press, 1984).

Islamic eschatology based on the Qur'an and *Hadīth* is found in such writings as the *Futūhāt al-makkiyyah* of Ibn 'Arabī.

In all traditional religions and cultural climes gnosis also provides the basis for the science of forms including artistic forms and makes comprehensible the language of symbolism. Although dealing at the highest level with the Formless, it is gnosis and metaphysics that provide the basis for the science of symbols especially in a world where the “symbolist spirit” has been lost.<sup>88</sup> In Islam treatises on theoretical gnosis do not usually deal explicitly in a separate section with forms and symbols but expound the principles of this science which are then applied when necessary. The writings of Ibn 'Arabī and Rūmī are replete with such examples. Such masters provide the science of spiritual hermenetics (*ta'wīl*) as well as apply it to diverse religious and artistic forms, symbols and myths including of course those found in the Qur'an itself.

Gnosis is illuminative and unitive knowledge and therefore it is natural that theoretical gnosis be concerned with knowledge as such, primarily sacred knowledge and knowledge of the sacred but also with the grades and the hierarchy of knowledge.<sup>89</sup> It is true that most traditional philosophies, including the Islamic, also deal with this issue, but it is only in works on theoretical gnosis that one finds the most universal treatment of this subject including of course supreme knowledge that is gnosis itself. Theoretical gnosis or *scientia sacra* is also the metaphysics that lies at the heart of perennial philosophy understood traditionally. It has been sometimes called theosophy, as this term was understood before its modern distortion, and is also related to what is called mystical theology and mystical philosophy in Western languages. In the Islamic tradition it has provided the ultimate criteria for the judgment of what constitutes *philosophia vera*. It has been foundational in the development of both traditional philosophy and the traditional sciences and is key to the deepest understanding of all traditional cosmological sciences including the “hidden sciences” (*al-'ulūm al-khafīyyah* or *gharibah*). The later

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<sup>88</sup> For outstanding examples of this function of metaphysics and gnosis see René Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols: The Universal Language of Sacred Science*, trans. Alvin Moore, ed. Martin Lings (Cambridge, UK: Quinta Essentia, 1995); and Martin Lings, *Symbol and Archetype: A Study of the Meaning of Existence* (Cambridge (UK): Quinta Essentia, 1991).

<sup>89</sup> We have dealt with this issue extensively in our *Knowledge and the Sacred*.

traditional schools of philosophy that have persisted in the Islamic world to this day, chief among the School of Illumination founded by Suhrawardī (d. 587/1191) and the Transcendent Theosophy/Philosophy established by Mullā Sadrā, are closely associated with *ʿirfān*. One might in fact say that while after the Middle Ages and the Renaissance in the West philosophy became more and more wedded and also subservient to modern science, as we see so clearly in Kant, in the Islamic world philosophy became ever more closely associated with *ʿirfān* from which it drew its sustenance and whose vision of reality served as basis for its philosophizing. One needs only read the works of Mullā Sadrā such as his *al-Shawāhid al-rubūbiyyah* or the treatises of Āqā ‘Alī Mudarris such as his *Badāyi’ al-hikam* to ascertain the truth of this assertion. Many of the works of the later Islamic philosophers are at the borderline between *hikmat* and *ʿirfān* although the two disciplines remain quite distinct from one another.

### **THE PRESENT DAY SIGNIFICANCE OF THEORETICAL GNOSIS**

Today the Islamic world suffers greatly from the neglect of its own intellectual tradition and yet there are some contemporary modernized Muslim philosophers, especially in the Arab world and to some extent Turkey, who dismiss later Islamic philosophy precisely because of its association with *ʿirfān* which they criticize pejoratively as mere mysticism. At the other end of the spectrum there are those so-called fundamentalists who are opposed to both reason and gnosis and turn their backs on and moreover criticize the Islamic intellectual tradition, at whose heart stands gnosis, on the pretext of wanting to save Islam. They are blind to the fact that it is precisely this intellectual tradition of which Islam is in the direst need today, faced as it is with the challenges of the modern world that are primarily intellectual.

Some of the greatest problems facing Islam on an intellectual level today are the invasion of a secularist worldview and secular philosophies; the spread of a science and technology based on a secular view of nature and of knowledge of nature; the environmental crisis which is closely related to the spread of modern technology; religious pluralism and the need to comprehend in depth other religions; the need to defend Islam itself against all the secularist or exclusivist Christian attacks against it emanating primarily from the West; the need to understand the principles of Islamic art and

architecture and to apply these principles to creating authentic Islamic art and architecture today; to provide an authentic Islamic answer to the relation between religion and science; to formulate an Islamic science of the soul or psychology; and to establish a firm foundation for the harmony between faith and reason. The role of *ʿirfān* is central to the solution of all of these as well as many other problems. It is only in gnosis that the unifying principle of faith and reason can be found. If one were only to understand *ʿirfān*, one would realize its supreme significance for Muslims today. Furthermore, *ʿirfān* is not enmeshed in the syllogistic form of reasoning to be found in Islamic philosophy, a form of reasoning that is alien to many contemporary people. Paradoxically, therefore, it is in a sense more accessible to those possessing intellectual intuition than traditional schools of Islamic philosophy which can also play and in fact must play an important role in the contemporary intellectual life of the Islamic world.

As already mentioned, in the traditional Islamic world theoretical gnosis was not only opposed by certain, but certainly not all, jurists, theologians and philosophers; it was also opposed by certain Sufis who claimed that gnosis is the result of what is attained through spiritual states and not through reading books on gnosis. Titus Burckhardt once told us that when he first went to Fez as a young man, one day he took the *Fusus* with him to a great teacher to study this basic text of *maʿrifah* or *ʿirfān* with him. The teacher asked him what book he was carrying under his arm. He said it was the *Fusus*. The teacher smiled and said, “Those who are intelligent enough to understand the *Fusus* do not need to study it, and those who are not intelligent enough are not competent to study it anyway.” The master nevertheless went on to teach the young S. Ibrāhīm (Titus Burckhardt) the *Fusus* but he was alluding to the significance of realized gnosis and not only its theoretical understanding, a knowledge that once realized delivers man from the bondage of ignorance, being by definition salvific knowledge. Burckhardt went on to translate a summary of the *Fusus* into French, a translation which played a seminal role in the introduction of the School of theoretical gnosis and Ibn ʿArabī to the West. In fact, although the magisterial exposition of gnosis and metaphysics by traditional masters such as René Guénon, Frithjof Schuon, Burckhardt himself and others were directly related to inner inspiration and intellection as well as teachings of non-Islamic origin, they were also inextricably linked with the tradition of *ʿirfān* discussed in this essay.

Of course, one does not become a saint simply by reading texts of *‘irfān* or even understanding them mentally. One has to realize their truths and “be” what one knows. Nevertheless, the body of knowledge contained in works of theoretical gnosis and doctrinal Sufism are a most precious science which Muslims must cherish as a gift from Heaven. This vast body of writings from Ibn ‘Arabī and Qūnawī to Āqā Muhammad Ridā Qumsha‘ī and Amīr ‘Abd al-Qādir and in the contemporary period from Mawlānā Thanwī, Muhammad ‘Alī Shāhābādī and Ayatollah Khomeini to Sayyid Jalāl al-Dīn Āshṭiyānī and Hasan-zādah Āmulī contain a body of knowledge of vast richness, a knowledge which alone can provide the deepest answers to many of the most acute contemporary intellectual, spiritual and even practical questions. But above all this tradition alone can provide for those Muslims capable of understanding it the Supreme Science of the Real, the science whose realization is the highest goal of human existence.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> See our *In the Garden of Truth* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, forthcoming).